The Third Commandment

Exodus 20:7

Study

This study examines the Third Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:7, which forbids taking the name of the LORD in vain. Far from merely prohibiting vulgar profanity, this commandment addresses the reverent use of God's holy name across all aspects of worship and life. God's name represents His character, His person, and His glory. Throughout Scripture, God's names reveal aspects of His divine nature and redemptive work. The Third Commandment calls believers to honor God's name in speech, in worship, in oaths, and in daily conduct. It warns against hypocrisy, false profession, and irreverent familiarity with the sacred. This study explores the theological significance of God's names, examines ways this commandment can be violated, and considers its application for believers today who claim the name of Christ as Lord and Savior. The commandment concludes with a solemn and explicit warning that God will not hold guiltless those who take His name in vain, underscoring the seriousness with which He regards the honor of His name.

Introduction

We come now to the Third Commandment, which reads, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." Like the first two commandments, this one concerns our relationship with God and the proper worship and honor all mankind should give to Him alone.

Most people, when they think of the Third Commandment, immediately think of profanity or swearing. While that's certainly part of it, the commandment encompasses far more than avoiding inappropriate language. It addresses how we use God's name in every context, whether in worship, in conversation, when making promises, or simply in living as Christians.

Consider how Jesus himself taught us to pray. The very first petition in the Lord's Prayer is "Our Father in heaven, ***hallowed be your name***." Before asking for daily bread, before seeking

forgiveness, before any other request, Jesus directs us to pray that God's name would be treated as holy. This highlights the central importance of honoring God's name and is closely linked to the Third Commandment. To "hallow" God's name means to regard it as special and to set it apart, to treat it with the reverence it deserves. This is precisely what the Third Commandment requires of us.

In our culture today, we are surrounded by the casual, irreverent use of God's name. The names of God and Jesus Christ are used repeatedly as expressions of surprise, anger, or emphasis, without regard for their sacred meaning. There is no doubt that this is a sure indicator of humanity's fallen and sinful condition. Even among professing Christians, there can be a dangerous familiarity and carelessness in how we speak of God. This commandment calls us to something far different.

The Meaning of God's Name

To understand this commandment properly, we must first understand what the name of God means. In Scripture, a name is much more than just a label or identifier. A person's name represents their character, reputation, and very being. This is especially true of God's name.

Throughout the Old Testament, God reveals Himself through various names, each one disclosing something of His character and nature. He is known as Elohim, the powerful Creator. He is Yahweh or Jehovah, the self-existent, eternal, covenant-keeping God. He is El Shaddai, God Almighty. He is Adonai, the sovereign Lord and Master. Each name carries weight and meaning.

When God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God's response was profound: "I AM WHO I AM." This name, often rendered as Yahweh or Jehovah, speaks of God's eternal, unchanging, self-existent nature. He is the God who was, who is, and who is to come.

Many centuries later, Jesus would use this exact name for Himself. In the Gospel of John, He repeatedly declared "I am," echoing the divine name revealed to Moses. When He said, "Before Abraham was, I am," the Jewish leaders understood exactly what He was claiming and gathered stones to stone Him for blasphemy. Jesus purposely identified Himself with the eternal, self-existent God of the burning bush. His "I am" statements throughout John's Gospel, in which He declares Himself the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, and the life, all point back to that holy name revealed to Moses. In Christ, we see the fullness of that name made flesh. We see the fullness of deity in bodily form.

The name of God is no small thing. It represents all that God is. It encompasses His holiness, power, love, justice, mercy, and every other divine attribute. When we use God's name, we invoke the character and presence of the Almighty. How we speak of Him and how we use His name reveal whether we truly fear Him in the biblical sense, that profound reverence and awe that recognizes who He is and who we are in relation to Him. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and nowhere is wisdom more evident than in how carefully and reverently we handle the name of the Eternal and Almighty God who spoke worlds into existence.

The Prohibition

The commandment states, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain." The Hebrew word translated "in vain" carries the idea of emptiness, worthlessness, or falseness. To take God's name in vain is to use it in an empty, frivolous, or deceptive manner. It is to treat as common and meaningless that which is holy and sacred. John Calvin, in his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, writes, "We ought to be so disposed in mind and speech that we neither think nor say anything concerning God and his mysteries, without reverence and much soberness; that in estimating his works we conceive nothing but what is honorable to him."[1]

Someone might think, “That was a different age and a different era. People took religion more seriously back then.” To that, I say nonsense! The Almighty and Holy God of Calvin’s day is the same God we worship and pray to in our day. All humanity owes to God the reverence and awe

[1] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22.

that is His due. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “There is none like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? ***For this is your due***; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you” (Jeremiah 10:6-7).

This commandment was given to a people who were called to honor God's name. Israel was called by the name of the LORD. They were His covenant-chosen people, set apart to represent Him among the nations. How they used His name mattered greatly because it reflected on His character and glory.

The same is true for the Church today. We confess the name of Christ. We are called Christians. We represent Him before a watching world. How we use His name and how we live as those called by His name are matters of the greatest importance.

Ways of Violating the Third Commandment

There are numerous ways in which this commandment can be broken. We would do well to examine each carefully. Sadly, multitudes have fallen into patterns of speech or behavior that dishonor the name of our God.

Perhaps most obviously, the Third Commandment is violated by profanity and cursing. Using God's name or the name of Jesus Christ as a curse word or an exclamation of anger is a direct violation of this command. Such usage treats the sacred name of God as common and meaningless. It is a form of blasphemy that shows contempt for the majesty and holiness of God.

Sadly, our society is inundated with this kind of language. The entertainment industry fills movies and television shows with profanity that uses God's name irreverently. It is increasingly difficult to find entertainment that does not use the name of our Savior as an expression of anger or frustration. Many people, without a second thought, use phrases such as "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ" as exclamations, without considering their meaning. This mindless speech is heard from people of all ages, including young people. As believers, such language should be

unthinkable. We should cringe every time the name of our precious Savior is used in such a thoughtless and ungodly way. We must guard our tongues and refuse to participate in speech that dishonors the true God we claim to worship.

The commandment is also violated by careless or thoughtless speech about God. This includes using God's name flippantly in conversation, making jokes about sacred things, or speaking of God in ways that show a lack of reverence and awe. There is a familiarity with God that may or may not be appropriate for those who have been adopted into His family through Christ. However, this familiarity must never cross the line into irreverence or presumption.

In Puritan writings, they often spoke of maintaining a "holy fear" of God even while enjoying close communion with Him. They understood that God is both our loving Father and the holy, transcendent Creator of all things. We must approach Him with reverence, even as we rejoice in the bold access we have through Christ. Our speech about God should reflect a balance of intimacy and awe.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah, who was given a rare vision of the eternal God in Heaven. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke" (Isaiah 6:1-4).

One must ask this question: If sinless angels constantly recognize the holiness of God, surely the fear of God should be in the hearts of sinful mankind! Tragically, our age has fallen far from this reverence, treating the names of God and Christ with a casualness that would have horrified earlier generations of believers.

J. I. Packer, in his well-known book *Knowing God*, captures the essence of this commandment when he writes: "The third commandment forbids us to use God's name in a way that is empty, frivolous, or insincere. It requires that we treat God's name with the respect that is due to God himself, remembering always who and what he is. Casual, thoughtless, or irreverent mention of God or Christ is forbidden, for it dishonors the one whose name is invoked."[2] It is a great grief to the believer to hear the name of their Redeemer used in such an evil manner, and they long for the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Next, the Third Commandment is broken by false oaths and broken vows. In the ancient world and in some contexts today, people invoked God's name when making solemn promises or taking oaths. To swear by the name of the LORD was to call upon God as a witness to the truth of what was said or the sincerity of what was promised.

If a person made an oath in God's name and then broke it, or if they swore falsely in His name, they were using God's name in vain. They were treating it as if it carried no weight or authority. Although in the modern age many seem to take vows lightly, divorce being just one example, this remains a serious matter. Jesus Himself addressed this issue in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching that our word should be so trustworthy that we have no need to invoke God's name to guarantee it. "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:37).

The application here extends beyond formal oaths to any promise or commitment we make. If we claim to be followers of Christ, our word should be our bond. We should be known as people of integrity whose yes means yes and whose no means no. When we make promises we do not keep, we dishonor His name and give the watching world reason to doubt the character of the God we claim to serve.

---

[2] J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 56.

Additionally, this commandment is violated through hypocrisy and false profession. This is perhaps the most subtle and dangerous way of breaking the Third Commandment, yet it may be the most common. When we claim to be followers of Christ yet live in ways that contradict that profession, we take His name in vain. We confess His name while denying His lordship through our actions.

Paul writes in Romans 2:24, quoting from the prophets, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." He was addressing Jews who claimed to know God but whose lives did not match their profession. The same charge can be leveled against many who call themselves Christians today. We take the name of Christ upon ourselves, but if our lives do not reflect His character, we use His name in vain. The Westminster Larger Catechism wisely observes that among the sins forbidden in the Third Commandment is "making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, by unconformable, unwise, unfruitful, and offensive walking, or backsliding from it."[3]

This is why Scripture places such emphasis on the fruit of genuine faith. True believers will not be perfect, and the remaining sin nature will be present, but there will be evidence of Christ in their lives. There will be growth in holiness, progress in sanctification, and an increasing conformity to the image of Christ. When these things are absent, when someone claims the name of Christ yet lives in persistent, unrepentant sin, they dishonor His name and bring reproach upon the gospel. I believe this is one of the reasons why the apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" I can think of no greater tragedy than claiming to be a Christian for most of your life, yet, in reality, remaining outside a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and at the judgment hearing these terrible words of Jesus, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' (Matthew 7:23).

[3] Westminster Assembly. *The Westminster Larger Catechism*. 1648.

The third commandment is also violated through irreverent worship. The manner in which we approach God in worship is of great importance. If we come before Him carelessly, if we sing His praises with our lips while our hearts are far from Him, if we treat the gathered worship of God's people as mere entertainment or a social gathering, we take His name in vain.

The prophet Malachi confronted this very issue among the people of Israel. They were going through the motions of worship, offering sacrifices and maintaining the outward forms of religion, but their hearts were not engaged. God rebuked them sharply with these words: "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?" (Malachi 1:8). By not offering the best to the Lord, they were treating the worship of God as just a formality, something to be gotten through with minimal effort or thought.

There is no doubt that we face similar temptations today. How easy it is to sit in church on Sunday morning with our minds wandering, to sing hymns without thinking about the words, and to hear the Word preached without applying it to our hearts. Such worship is vain. It uses the name of God in vain by treating Him as unworthy of our full attention and wholehearted devotion.

The Seriousness of the Warning

The Third Commandment concludes with a stern warning: "The LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." This is strong language. God is making clear that violations of this commandment will not go unpunished. Those who treat His name with contempt, who use it carelessly or falsely, will be held accountable.

This warning teaches us that God is jealous for the glory and honor of His name. Throughout Scripture, we see God acting to vindicate His name and protect His reputation. When the people of Israel grievously sinned and brought shame upon His name, God judged them severely. Yet even in judgment, His ultimate purpose was the vindication of His name and the restoration of His glory.

The warning also underscores the gravity of calling oneself a Christian. To be called by the name of the LORD is a tremendous privilege, but it comes with responsibility. Believers in Christ are His representatives and ambassadors. How they conduct themselves reflects on Him. Calvin reminds us of the weight of claiming God's name: "Those who have been adopted as children of God, and admitted to the fellowship of the Church, must reverence God as their Father. For if He is our Father, His glory ought to be dear to us, that we may not permit it to be tarnished by any reproach. Since He has been pleased to consecrate us to Himself, and to make us the temple of His Holy Spirit, we ought to take care that His name be not blasphemed through our fault."[4]

At the same time, we must remember that God is merciful. For those who have violated this commandment, and that includes all of us to some degree, there is forgiveness in Christ. The gospel tells us that Jesus bore the guilt of our sins, including our sins of speech and our failures to honor God's name as we ought. Through faith in Him, we can be declared guiltless, not because we have perfectly kept this commandment, but because Christ has kept it perfectly on our behalf and has taken on the punishment we deserved for breaking it.

This does not diminish the seriousness of the warning. Rather, it should lead us to the cross in gratitude and motivate us to live in a manner worthy of adoption into the family of God. Having been forgiven much, we should love much and should strive to honor the One who has shown us such mercy.

God's Name in the New Testament

The New Testament continues and expands the teaching of the Third Commandment. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." To hallow something is to treat it as holy, to set it apart as sacred. This should be our constant desire and prayer, that God's name would be honored and revered, both in our own hearts and throughout the world.

[4] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22.

Jesus also taught that we will give an account for every careless word we speak. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37). This truth should cause us to examine our speech carefully. Are we using God's name reverently? Are our words building up or tearing down? Are we speaking in ways that honor Christ?

The apostles emphasized the importance of the name of Jesus Christ. Peter proclaimed, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The name of Jesus is powerful. It is the name above every name, to which every knee will one day bow. How we treat that name now matters for eternity.

Paul exhorted believers, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). To do something in the name of Jesus is to do it with His authority, as His representative, and for His glory. This should govern every aspect of our lives. Are we living and speaking in ways that honor the name of Christ?

Application for Believers Today

How then should we apply this commandment in our daily lives? Before exploring its practical application, we must recognize that this commandment ultimately points us to Christ. Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). He perfectly honored His Father's name in every word, thought, and deed. Where we have failed to guard God's name with our lips and lives, Christ succeeded completely. His perfect obedience becomes ours through faith, and His Spirit now works in us to produce the very reverence this commandment demands. We keep this commandment not to earn God's favor, which is already ours in Christ, but because we have been transformed by His grace and empowered by His Spirit.

We must remember that the commandments are a guide for the believer, sometimes called a "rule of life." Our blessed Savior kept all of them perfectly. We stand upon His merits and righteousness. Seeking to live by the light of Scripture, we do so out of love and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. With this gospel foundation established, we can consider several practical matters to which the Third Commandment applies today.

We must use caution in our speech. This includes not only avoiding profanity and vulgar language but also being thoughtful and reverent in how we speak about God and His Word. Our casual conversations should reflect the same reverence for God's name that we show in more formal settings. We should avoid using God's name thoughtlessly, even in expressions that have become common in our culture.

This also means being careful about how we speak to God in prayer. While we should approach Him with the confidence and intimacy that comes through Christ, we must never lose sight of His majesty and holiness. Our prayers should be marked by reverence, even as they express the closeness we enjoy with our heavenly Father.

Consider also the matter of keeping our word. When we make promises or commitments, we should keep them. Our yes should mean yes, and our no should mean no. Believers in Christ should be known for integrity and character that align with their profession of faith. This is especially important when we have made vows to God, whether marriage vows, membership vows in a church, or other important commitments. To break such vows is to treat God's name lightly and to invite His discipline.

Beyond our words and promises, we must examine our hearts for hypocrisy. Do our lives match our profession? Are we growing in holiness and Christlikeness, or are we content to claim to be Christians while living in ways that contradict Holy Scripture? This calls for regular self-examination and an honest, humble assessment of where we truly stand before God.

Jesus often rebuked the religious leaders about hypocrisy. Six times in Matthew 23, Jesus uses the phrase “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.” Matthew 23:27-28 is but one example, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

It was not only the religious leaders who received rebuke and warnings. In Luke 12:1b, speaking to His disciples, He said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” The point is that, in our sinful nature, especially among church leaders, there remains the temptation toward hypocrisy. Those who profess to know Christ must fight against it!

We must also be willing to address hypocrisy when we see it in the church. This is not about being judgmental or self-righteous. It is about loving our brothers and sisters enough to speak the truth in love when their lives are bringing reproach on the name of Christ. The goal is always restoration, not condemnation, but we must not ignore patterns of sin that dishonor God's name.

Think also about how we worship. Whether we are gathered with the church for corporate worship or in our private devotions, we should approach God with hearts prepared to meet Him. We should come expecting to encounter the living God, and our worship should reflect the weight and wonder of that reality. This means preparing our hearts before we come to worship, engaging our minds and emotions during worship, and carrying the impact of that worship into our daily lives.

If we teach or preach, we must prayerfully handle Scripture carefully and accurately, with a deep desire for the Holy Spirit's help. If we are students of the Word, we must read and interpret it honestly, seeking to understand what God has said rather than reading our own ideas into the text. In all our use of Scripture, we must remember that we are handling the very words of God and do so with appropriate reverence and care. We must hear and keep the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Above all, we must remember that we are Christians. We are called by His name. Everything we do and say should be done with an awareness of whose we are and whom we represent. When people look at us, they should see something of Christ. When they hear us speak, they should hear words that honor Him. When they observe our lives, they should see evidence of His transforming power.

This is a high calling, and we will often fall short. But this is precisely why we need the gospel. We need a Savior who perfectly honored the Father's name and who can forgive us when we fail. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us to live in ways that bring glory to God. We need the church community to encourage, correct, and spur us on toward love and good deeds.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the Third Commandment calls us to honor God's name in every aspect of our lives. It forbids not only profanity but also careless speech, broken vows, hypocrisy, irreverent worship, and the misuse of God's Word. It reminds us that being in the Kingdom of God is a privilege that entails great responsibility.

The warning at the end of the commandment must be taken seriously. God will not hold guiltless those who take His name in vain. Yet for those who trust in Christ, there is forgiveness for every failure and power to live in a manner worthy of the name we profess.

As we reflect on this commandment, we need to examine our hearts and our speech. Are we honoring God's name as we should? Are our lives consistent with our profession of faith? Are we using our words to build up or to tear down, to honor God or to dishonor Him?

May God give us grace to hallow His name, to speak of Him with reverence and awe, to keep our promises, to worship with sincerity, and to live as those who truly belong to Christ. May the name of the LORD be glorified in us and through us, both now and forevermore. And may we, by His grace, be found among those whose lives bring honor rather than reproach to the name that is above every name, the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.